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PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

JAMES AND BERGSON: OR, WHO IS AGAINST INTELLECT?

IF there is one task more thankless and unprofitable than criticizing critics, it is reporting reporters. Yet even this seems warranted by its benefits in the case of Professor James and his recent accounts of M. Bergson. Professor James is the unchallenged veteran leader of American psychology and philosophy; M. Bergson the rising marshal of French thinkers. Each man's marching orders are taken in deadly earnest at home and abroad. So, if both speak as in agreement while differing profoundly, the unhappy rank and file, which is trained to take words at their mouth value, will be confused. That this danger is neither remote nor imaginary, can scarcely be doubted by any one who takes pains to compare James's anti-intellectualism with Bergson's, and James's report of Bergson with Bergson's report on himself. Behind one or two important common convictions, which are chiefly on questions of method, a mass of far-reaching, irreconcilable doctrines lies half-concealed. For the sake of clarity and with no approval or criticism of either philosopher's opinions, I should like to point out a few divergent tendencies and sharp oppositions which, I believe, must constitute a perpetual injunction against every attempt to identify or even to harness up the radical empiricism of Cambridge with Parisian intuitionism. "Abridgments like this of other men's opinions are very unsatisfactory. They always work injustice," says Professor James at the close of his sketch of Bergsonism in "A Pluralistic Universe."¹ This is twice true of the following remarks, which are largely an abridgment of an abridgment; but their injustice weighs lightly over against their fairness.

Professor James can find much in Bergson's pages echoing his own sentiments. Like him, Bergson opposes every static view of reality, stands out for genuine freedom and continuous creation in a flowing world. Both thinkers insist that man must look inward,

¹ Page 241.

dive into the stream of consciousness, for the richest truths. As destructive critics of static absolutism, both stand shoulder to shoulder. But at these broader tendencies of speculation and of method agreement stops. Bergson goes the way of the older cosmologists, James stays with the subjectivistically inclined psychologists. Bergson repudiates psychophysics and nearly all experiment and hypothesis going with it, while James often unconsciously, as in his "Principles of Psychology," embraces Fechner and all he stands for. Bergson peers through his "mental stream" and spies something underneath; but James forever lingers in the flood, saying: "*though one part of our experience may lean upon another part to make it what it is in any one of several aspects in which it may be considered, experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing.*"² Bergson declares that the *élan vital* and its antagonistic counter-current are each in its pure form unknowable, inasmuch as all cognition is nothing but a kind of collision between these two streams and a mixing of them: James long ago assured us that his radical empiricism "must neither admit into its constructions any element *that is not directly experienced* nor exclude from them any element *that is directly experienced.*"³ Where Bergson thinks of life as transcending experience, James thinks only of experience as transcending conceptual thinking. Were I to attempt an all-around account of their systems, I should certainly turn everything in them about this fundamental difference in the point of view. Hence, for Bergson, the last inwardness of every experience is quite beyond the most searching intuition; it is, however, not in the least "absolutely dumb and evanescent, the *merely ideal* limit of our minds," as that reality "independent" of human thinking appears to James.⁴ It is twofold, a tremendous creative activity and an enormously stubborn, by no means "evanescent," matter. Such antitheses might be multiplied almost indefinitely, but let them pass; it is more profitable to limit ourselves to a contrast of our two philosophers' theories of the concept. For it is Bergson's critique of intellectualism, as founded on his interpretation of conceptual experience, that wins the space of a whole chapter for him in James's "A Pluralistic Universe." And yet it is precisely on this topic that Professor James makes me suspect that he has called upon an opponent to do a friend's service. If I read both writers correctly, Professor James has sympathetically chalked up against Bergson many a costly item which the Frenchman has never entered on his books—and never will. Before accepting this statement, you should peruse the citations in their

² This JOURNAL, II., p. 114.

³ *Ib.*, I., p. 534.

⁴ "Pragmatism," p. 248.

original context I shall make; the obligation is peculiarly strong because both men freely indulge in all the tropes known to the literary artist, and still more because, in many points, their theories differ no more than but just as much as an infinitesimal segment of a curve does from an infinitesimal segment of a straight line.

James thinks to find in Bergson's theory of concepts confirmation of his own view that "the completer our definitions of ether-waves, atoms, Gods, or souls become, the less instead of the more intelligible do they appear to us. . . . Ether and molecules may be like co-ordinates and averages, only so many crutches by the help of which we practically perform the operation of getting about among our sensible experiences."⁵ But this kind of pragmatic psychology seems to me absolutely incompatible with everything Bergson is driving at. Far from pronouncing "matter," "energy," and like concepts mere "extraordinarily successful hypotheses" whose sole claim to our preferences is their superior utility for human purposes, the French intuitionist firmly holds to the objective reality of matter. On the very first page of his introduction to "*L'Évolution Créatrice*" I read: . . . *notre intelligence, au sens étroit du mot, est destinée à assurer l'insertion parfaite de notre corps dans son milieu, à se représenter les rapports des choses extérieures entre elles, enfin à penser la matière.*

To think matter! Hardly a Cambridge performance, this! The external things are "out there," they are tough, thick, obstinate—quite loath to evanesce or to be the mere ideal limits of thought. And in a later chapter, "*De la Signification de la Vie*," Bergson says that science commits no sensible error in cutting up the universe into relatively independent systems, for "*la matière s'étend dans l'espace sans y être absolument étendue.*"⁶ What does this mean? That the physicist's interpretation of nature carries us further from the latter as he works out his concepts more fully? Not at all. Science is always approaching an adequate description of matter, but such a description is unattainable only as 2 is the unattainable sum of the series $1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \dots$.

Ainsi, l'espace de notre géométrie et la spatialité des choses s'engendrent mutuellement par l'action et la réaction réciproques de deux termes *qui sont de même essence*, mais qui marchent en sens inverse l'un de l'autre. Ni l'espace n'est aussi étranger à notre nature que nous nous le figurons, ni la matière n'est aussi complètement étendue dans l'espace que notre intelligence *et nos sens* la représentent.⁷

In this difficult passage, which sorely needs its whole original set-

⁵ "A Pluralistic Universe," p. 342.

⁶ "*L'Évolution Créatrice*," p. 222.

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 221.

ting, one point stands out brilliantly: Bergson expressly repudiates the very construction which Professor James places upon his theory. Summarizing Bergson's treatment of Zeno's paradoxes and mathematical-geometrical concepts of time and space, Professor James reports the intuitionist as teaching that, "instead of being interpreters of reality, *concepts negate the inwardness of reality altogether.*"⁸ Note, please, the two words I have italicized. Not Zeno's concepts, not yours nor mine, but concepts *as such* are guilty. And they are not simply defective or incomplete; they are *altogether* mendacious in what concerns the interpenetrating densities of cosmic action. I defy anybody to grub so much as a grain of this ore out of Bergson's mine! Here is another fragment even less amenable to Professor James's reading:

L'entendement est chez lui dans le domaine de la matière inerte. Sur cette matière s'exerce essentiellement l'action humaine, et l'action, . . . ne saurait se mouvoir dans l'irréel. Ainsi, *pourvu que l'on ne considère de la physique que sa forme générale, et non pas le détail de sa réalisation, on peut dire qu'elle touche l'absolu.*⁹

Lo! The horrid absolute rears its head even in Bergson! And it is the dead, chopped-out concept, the "form" of physical knowledge, which actually fingers the monster. The concept is not invented at each man's own sweet will, by breaking up the flux with the same freedom; we do not "create the subjects of our true as well as of our false propositions," as James thinks.¹⁰

Atoms and ether and potential energy and all the other things of physical nature are all perfectly real objects or forces in a perfectly real space. They are, indeed, so exceedingly real, so chock full of existence, that, when we encounter them in the sudden shock that constitutes intelligence, we simply can not take them all in; all we gather about them in discrete thought is their surfaces at the points of our collision with them and their standstill at the instant of that collision. On this score Bergson speaks beyond all equivocation. The escape from Democritus, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, so far as the question of spirit and matter is concerned, is found in the hypothesis

" . . . que ni la matière ne détermine la forme de l'intelligence, ni l'intelligence n'impose sa forme à la matière, ni la matière et l'intelligence n'ont réglées l'une sur l'autre par je ne sais quelle harmonie préalable mais que *progressivement l'intelligence et la matière se sont adaptées l'une à l'autre pour s'arrêter enfin à une forme commune.* Cette adaptation se serait d'ailleurs effectuée tout naturellement, parce que c'est la même inversion du même mouve-

⁸ "A Pluralistic Universe," p. 246.

⁹ "Evolution Créatrice," p. 216.

¹⁰ "Pragmatism," p. 254 sq.

ment qui crée à la fois l'intellectualité de l'esprit et la matérialité des choses."¹¹

And, in the very next sentences, this profound thinker adds the implications of this hypothesis. These, I think, no student can read without perceiving instantly the world-wide difference between Bergson and James.

"De ce point de vue, la connaissance que nous donnent de la matière notre perception, d'un côté, et la science, de l'autre, nous apparaît *comme approximative, mais non pas comme relative*. . . . Il faudrait, pour qu'une théorie scientifique fut définitive, que l'esprit pût embrasser en bloc la totalité des choses et les situer exactement les unes par rapport aux autres; mais en réalité nous sommes obligés de poser les problèmes un à un, en termes qui sont par là même des termes provisoires, de sorte que la solution de chaque problème devra être indéfiniment corrigée par la solution qu'on donnera des problèmes suivants, et que la science, dans son ensemble, est relative à l'ordre contingent dans lequel les problèmes ont été posés tour à tour. C'est en ce sens et dans cette mesure qu'il faut tenir la science pour conventionnelle. *Mais la conventionalité est de fait pour ainsi dire, et non pas de droit*. En principe, la science positive porte sur la réalité même, pourvu qu'elle ne sorte pas de son domaine propre, qui est la matière inerte."

Perception and scientific theorizing rated in the same class, and that class a producer, not of relative but of approximate knowledge! Surely James must cry halt at this, and still more sharply at Bergson's hypothesis that the limitations of conceptual thinking are imposed not by human desires as much as by the trick things have of happening one after another and being likewise experienced.

How can Professor James report that Bergson says "concepts make things less, not more intelligible, when we use them seriously and radically?" How can he believe that Bergson thinks concepts "serve us practically more than theoretically"? That the Frenchman regards them as "throwing their map of abstract terms and relations around our present experience"? And that the author of "L'Évolution Créatrice" thinks that "conception, developing its subtler and more contradictory implications, comes to an end of its usefulness, . . . and runs itself into the ground," whereupon Bergson "*drops* conception"? (Professor James himself italicizes this last verb.)

The fact is, according to Bergson, that concepts alone make things intelligible; that they serve us in theory better than in practise ("action," he says, "breaks the circle of logic"); and that, far from being a map *thrown about* our present experience, they *are* our present experience itself, halted in its flight, and by the shock of stopping or "kicking back" condensing, as it were, into hard lumps—always into lumps of perfectly real, objective nature. These lumps or precipitations are not "cut out" of reality, at all, as Professor

¹¹ "Évolution Créatrice," p. 225.

James construes Bergson.¹² They are a phase of reality, they stay in their stream. They are neither copies nor distortions of matter in the picture-gallery of the vital force; they are intelligence itself and matter itself, each in a *special* relation to the other. What Bergson sees and James apparently does not is that things are none the less real when they are motionless and external to one another than when they shoot through one another and interpenetrate and move. James imagines that Bergson agrees with him in supposing a concept to be a convenient misrepresentation made for exclusively practical purposes. But, as I read Bergson, he clearly states that a concept is reality (a part or phase of reality) retarded and solidified, representing nothing whatever, distorting nothing whatever, but simply *being* that which we *live* it as being, a cosmic character distinct from others. In its particular setting the characteristic is distinct, but only there; where there is no collision between the vital energy and obstructing matter, where the former runs on smoothly (and perhaps also where matter is serenely alone and uninvaded by spirit?), there all other qualities of nature shoot through it and live in it, so that it is external to them in neither space nor time. Were more quoting called for, we might reprint pages iii and iv of "L'Évolution Créatrice," where Bergson—after describing all those who, like James, deem the best product of intellectual effort a symbol or pragmatic construct, as suffering from "un excès d'humilité"—argues that the pragmatic nature of human activity makes it most probable that conceptual thinking reaches the absolute or some feature of it. "Une intelligence tendue vers l'action qui s'accompliva et vers la réaction qui s'ensuivra, palpant son objet pour en recevoir à chaque instant l'impression mobile, est une intelligence qui touche quelque chose de l'absolu."

These random gleanings misrepresent each philosopher, of course, for each writes a flux even as he preaches one. But I think that whoever will work out in detail some of the contrasts indicated must sooner or later come to wonder how such an acute, sympathetic, and well-seasoned reader as Professor James ever fancied he saw an exponent of his anti-intellectualism in Bergson. How could he write that Bergson and Bradley together "have broken my confidence in concepts down"?¹³ Surely, if ever a man taught that concepts are to be trusted, *in so far as we know what we are doing with them, and in so far as we use them intelligently*, that man is Bergson. For James, the lead of intellect sends us over the divide between rationalism and empiricism down into the intellectualistic valley of dry bones and into the abyss of deception. For Bergson, the intel-

¹² "A Pluralistic Universe," p. 235.

¹³ This JOURNAL, VII., p. 33.

lect heads always for the living reality of things, but, finding each next advance more arduous than the last, stops always at an approximation of that last truth which one bold, keen intuition suggests but can never quite lay bare. Could two theories of the concept differ more in spirit?

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ON CONTINUITY AND DISCRETENESS

IT would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the whole logical crux of metaphysics centers in the problem of continuity and discreteness. Whether one approach this problem with the emphasis on the relation of the one and the many, or on the relation of permanence and change, the same duality breaks out—either in the static antithesis of unity and manifoldness, or in the dynamic antithesis of the continuity which is permanence and the discreteness which is change.

Abstract monisms, from Parmenides to Spinoza, regard ultimate reality as a homogeneous and unchanging continuum, in which the whole is both logically and existentially prior to the parts. The most obvious empirical source of this view is the apparent homogeneity, unity, and permanence of pure space. Parmenides describes the One in spatial terms. Spinoza conceives the one substance as an infinite whole and it is no accident that he develops his system *more geometrico*. I do not, of course, mean to imply that Spinoza's substance is simply space emptied of all content, but only that the geometrical metaphor plays a large part in his conception thereof.

All forms of pluralism, on the other hand, have found a chief determining motive in the analytical dissolution of the perceptual continua of the space-time world, and, especially, of movement and change, into discrete elements, or "terms," and "relations." Continuity seems thereby to be reduced to a more and more relative and transitive position. In Leibniz, who formulated the law of continuity, there is the closest possible connection between his dynamic pluralism and his mathematical analysis, devised to obtain formulas for the calculation of continuous variables.

The progress of science seems to consist in the breaking up of the perceptual continua of immediate experience into discrete elements and events. Physics, chemistry, biology, and psychology pulverize the continua of space and motion, physical and vital processes, and consciousness, respectively. The analytic side of science brings out discreteness in experience, and, by a one-sided emphasis